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8 August 2007

TRANSCRIPT OF DOORSTOOP - FOREIGN CORRESPONDENTS ASSOCIATION, MLC
CENTRE, SYDNEY
E & OE - PROOF ONLY

Subjects: Australia-US Alliance; Iraq; Afghanistan; Pacific and regional security;
Howard relationship with US President; Darfur

JOURNALIST: (Inaudible)

McCLELLAND: Further than that we would do a lot to strengthen our relationship with the United States - building on some really outstanding work they do in our region and it's not simply military work. It's capacity building at all levels: the scholarships, the training they provide whether it's in the area of disaster management, managing diseases, preventing a pandemic. Whether it's government's capacity building, whether it's economic capacity building or indeed law enforcement capacity building - they do a really, truly outstanding job.

Indeed in many ways they're roles in which the United States is undervalued and we could really give additional grunt to working with the United States in those areas.

JOURNALIST: Are you also saying we should focus more on our own nation and it would be a better... if we withdrew our own troops (inaudible)?

McCLELLAND: Yes we unquestionably think Australia can be most effective in taking care of our arc of responsibility by not having this revolving series of military interventions but by actually building capacity in countries struggling in our region.

Certainly from the point of view of the international fight against terrorism our backyard is one of the most dangerous in the world and we can be most effective by focusing our resources in our own backyard.

JOURNALIST: You said that mates will tell their mates the truth. How does that sit with consulting the US about leaving Iraq when a mate will tell them we shouldn't be there?

McCLELLAND: Well again you've got to sit down and say this is our view, you have seen it stated at numerous times before the election and say we'll do that. That we're committed to withdrawing our troops from southern Iraq however we don't want to prejudice the safety of anyone we're working with, any troops we are working with either United States or United Kingdom or the

safety of our own troops. We want to sit down and work through a program with for that to occur.

The reality is there will be an election in October or November. The current deployment to Southern Iraq I think ends in December, we've indicated that we would have a further rotation while those discussions are taking place so the reality is barring anything occurring in those discussions we would be looking at a withdrawal about mid next year.

I would be surprised if you're not seeing by that stage the British also moving steadily along the path to a withdrawal of their troops by that time as well.

JOURNALIST: You're essentially saying you don't think the Government of Iraq will ever stand on its own two feet or govern unless all troops leave Iraq?

McCLELLAND: I don't think the Government of Iraq is going to stand on its own two feet while ever it has this open-ended and open-cheque-book commitment. I think it requires saying: alright the time has come to end where you have received this open ended and open cheque book commitment - the time has now come for you to stand on your own two feet.

I think it is indicating that there is going to be an end to the contribution that other countries are making. It is the important thing and certainly if you look at the numbers alone they would appear to have that capacity with 330,000 members of their security forces.

JOURNALIST: By contribution you mean military not money?

McCLELLAND: Iraq is going to need assistance from the international community for a long time in terms of infrastructure, in terms of economic assistance, in terms of border security. That unquestionably is going to be required and indeed a future Labor Rudd Government is committed to it.

I was with Mr Rudd where he offered the Iraqi Foreign Minister support by a future Labor Government to border security expertise - which he in turn indicated will be gratefully received for instance.

But from the point of view of actually taking control of the streets - the streets of Baghdad and elsewhere - the time has come to say the Iraqis need to be put on notice that in terms of their day to day policing and domestic security they have got to step up to the plate.

JOURNALIST: But you would say [inaudible] and put those people in the Asia Pacific region those soldiers that are deployed in Iraq?

McCLELLAND: Again, those specific soldiers obviously would be returned to Australia but certainly the resources that support those soldiers whether it's the logistics, whether it's command and control, whether it's the important intelligence resources - electronic and otherwise - would be available to assist and provide greater security for our troops in Afghanistan.

Now whether you deployed an equivalent number of troops to Afghanistan, they would be issues that you would take advice from the military in terms of what is needed to achieve the mission of our troops in Afghanistan and provide effective security.

So there wouldn't necessarily be a precise correlation between withdrawals and deployments but certainly in terms of those back-up resources - intelligence in particular - which I can tell you are vitally important to the well being of the troops on the ground in a combat situation, they would be available to focus on our troops in Afghanistan.

JOURNALIST: With so much instability in the Pacific region, I mean is that one of the reasons why the [inaudible] government would focus on that?

McCLELLAND: We believe that the Pacific is our arc of responsibility. We can't have a withdrawal strategy from our region - it's our region, we're here. The international community expects us to really build capacity in our region and address the issues in our region. Now that has to be our priority. But we think the Howard Government's taken its eye off the ball in our region.

They have been very simplistic in using our military - and I do not want to devalue or undermine or belittle the role our military, they are very, very important people. But if you talk to any military planner they will tell you that there is a limited amount the military can achieve in terms of the long term stability and peace building operations that are required to get a country up and running. And we think the government hasn't had sufficient focus on those issues to really build the capacity that we need to build in our arc of responsibility.

JOURNALIST: Is that because the current government is trying to invest a better relationship with the American Government by doing what it wanted us to do?

McCLELLAND: I think there is a risk that the Prime Minister's personal relationship with President Bush - and it's a personal relationship that I respect - but I think there is risk that that personal relationship has caused a misallocation of priorities in terms of resourcing Australia's long term security interests.

JOURNALIST: Would you say he has been seduced by the power associated with US policy?

McCLELLAND: I wouldn't say that. I genuinely think he has a strong personal relationship with President Bush. I think it is a genuine relationship, I think he is genuinely being loyal to a friend who is currently in power in the United States. But there is a risk that that personal loyalty is impeding the judgment of where Australia's broader and longer term security interests lie.

JOURNALIST: Was it the new Howard biography which suggests that Howard's father and grandfather's involvement in war is very much part of his

desire to push the Anzac's myth and get involved in international conflicts like Iraq. What would you say to that?

McCLELLAND: I think that's unfair. I have seen him, I've been to a number of functions where I think he has got a genuine affection and affinity for..

JOURNALIST: War?

McCLELLAND: No, for Australian soldiers. And in the sense that they are basically knockabout sort of blokes and women and I've seen him mixing and genuinely relating to them.

I think he does have that genuine affinity and respect for them. I wouldn't say and I think it would be wrong to say, and I disagree with the assertion that our Prime Minister is a war monger.

JOURNALIST: Just on another region would the ALP send troops into Darfur?

McCLELLAND: We would certainly provide assistance to the international mission in Darfur. We've indicated already that it's very difficult from Opposition to work out what resources are available to sensibly deploy.

Again it is consistent with where we think our strategic priorities lie in our region but there unquestionably would be a range of resources that we would look at where it be in the nature of air traffic resources, whether it be in air transport resources, whether it be in logistic support, whether it be in medical capacity with medical reservists. These are things we would certainly be prepared to look at and explore to deploy.

The other area where we unquestionably would be prepared to look at and if you recall Mr Rudd is committed to increasing the size of our Australian Federal Police to facilitate their role in overseas deployment. We unquestionably would look at the feasibility of deploying Australian Federal Police along with the first 20,000 odd that the United Nations will be deploying in Darfur. We would certainly be prepared to look at those options.

JOURNALIST: So more than the half a dozen I think that we have there plus the medical staff would've been (inaudible).

McCLELLAND: It's an international crisis. Again I am talking beyond my brief but you look at Evatt's speeches when he came back from the United Nations very much the Australian Labor Party has always been a supporter of international peacekeeping work by the United Nations. And again consistent with our other demands and priorities we think it is important that as a good international citizen to make more than simply a symbolic contribution to these efforts.

It is an important effort and the other thing is that, well both sides of Australian politics support, is this doctrine of responsibility to intervene to prevent these humanitarian crises occurring.

If you're fair dinkum about committing to that responsibility you've got to be fair dinkum in committing more than simply a tokenistic contribution.

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